

# Building a Culture of Joyful Learning

A Case Study of Improvement at the  
Harvard-Kent Elementary School



2020 Best Practice Research from the School on the Move Prize





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On a Monday morning in June 2019, families and teachers lined the waterfront of Boston’s Charlestown neighborhood. The crowd erupted into applause as *Flaming Hot Cheetos*, a 10-foot rowing skiff, took its maiden voyage. Operated by three fifth-grade students, the boat meandered around the docks of Boston Harbor before pulling up to the shoreline. Just days away from their elementary school graduation, the children who built the boat beamed with pride.

The lead-up to launch day began in the fall, when fifth graders at the Harvard-Kent Elementary School traded 12 days of classroom instruction for real-world math and science in a woodworking shop adjacent to Boston Harbor. They applied their math skills to create a scaled two-dimensional drawing of the three-dimensional boat. They learned the laws of physics in the process of building a seaworthy vessel. They returned to the classroom with renewed excitement, having seen how these academic topics apply outside the classroom.

When Harvard-Kent staff first learned about the Community Boat Building program, many were concerned that the time away might distract from classroom learning. Could students reach grade-level learning targets with 12 days of missed class time? Despite academic concerns, Principal Jason Gallagher and the fifth-grade teachers quickly agreed to the opportunity. Though their students were growing up near the ocean, many had never explored Boston’s waterfront. Educators adjusted the school schedule to accommodate the boat building program.

Over the past five years, a willingness to take risks and experiment with instruction has catapulted academic performance at the Harvard-Kent, one of the most racially diverse schools in Boston. The Harvard-Kent is now shrinking opportunity and achievement gaps for low-income students, students with disabilities, students of color, and English Language Learners. This case study explores how the Harvard-Kent made impressive academic gains by engaging teachers to create a school culture where students feel valued and where learning is experiential and engaging.

## The Foundation for Improvement

Long before the Harvard-Kent started making rapid academic gains, the school was a warm and welcoming place. Though proficiency rates in English and math were relatively low, MCAS results often fail to tell the whole story. Administrators and educators knew every child by name, including those they had never worked with directly. On weekday mornings, principal Jason Gallagher could often be found on the playground participating in games with students and staff. Educators collaborated regularly to identify ways to meet individual students’ non-academic needs.

According to district administrators, the Harvard-Kent was known as a school where all students, particularly those facing social-emotional difficulties, found a sense of belonging. Home to a specialized program for students with emotional disabilities, the Harvard-Kent implemented trauma-sensitive practices schoolwide. Educators found that the Harvard-Kent’s safe and welcoming community benefitted every student, with a particularly beneficial impact on students who had been exposed to trauma or experienced emotional challenges.

Research shows that students who feel known and valued are more prepared to meaningfully engage in learning. Students who experience a sense of belonging have better self-esteem, higher rates of classroom participation, and higher academic achievement (Korpershoek, 2018). As a result of creating a positive school climate for both students and educators, the Harvard-Kent had the conditions in place to make rapid academic gains. When educators implemented the instructional improvements described in this case study, student proficiency improved dramatically because children were in the right mindset for learning.

Jason Gallagher, Principal. Harvard-Kent

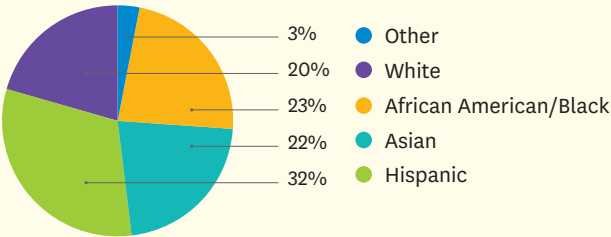
“If you are a member of the Harvard-Kent school community, we want you to feel important, loved, and valued. We also want you to become a proficient reader, writer, and mathematician.”



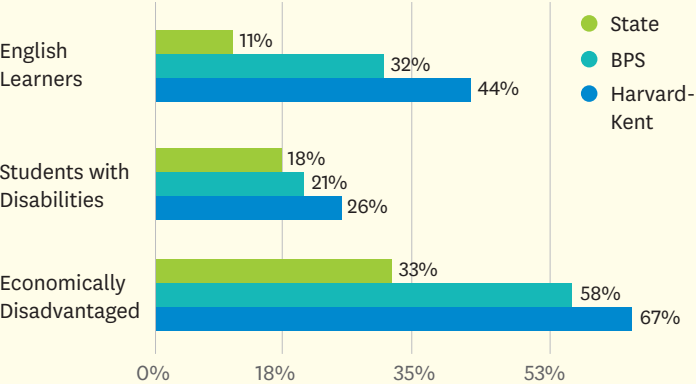
A Look at the Harvard-Kent

Located in the heart of Charlestown, the Harvard-Kent serves 365 students in grades Pre-K to 5. The school serves the highest percentage of children living in public housing of any Boston school. It is home to a specialized program for students learning English as well as a therapeutic program for children with emotional disabilities. Students represent a range of races, ethnicities, and home languages.

Student Race/Ethnicity (Demographics 2019-2020)

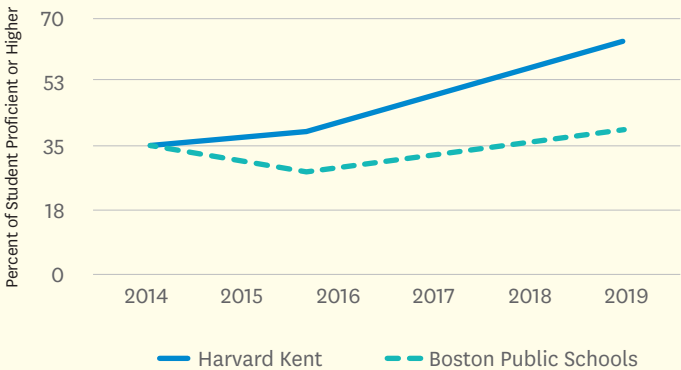


Special Populations (Demographics 2019-2020)



English Language Arts Achievement (MCAS)

The chart depicts academic improvement at the Harvard-Kent between 2014-2019. The school made significant improvement in English Language Arts over a 5-year period.



Specialized Programs

The Harvard-Kent is home to:

- A special education program for students with emotional disabilities
- A Sheltered English Immersion program for English learners whose native language is Chinese

School Climate

The chart below reflects perceptions of student-teacher relationships at the Harvard-Kent (2018-19). Students were asked to assess the strength of relationships on a scale from 1 (lowest) – 5 (highest). Survey results indicate that the Harvard-Kent is meeting or exceeding community-wide standards for student-teacher relationships, as detailed in the key below.



Performance Spectrum: How to Interpret the Zones

- **Warning:** Schools in this zone are five or more years away from reaching community-wide targets. Consequently, this zone—as established by teachers, parents, principals, and district administrators— indicates that this is an area in need of significant improvement. If a school is not in the warning zone in other areas, it may still be successful overall, but must immediately develop a plan for addressing its shortcomings.
- **Watch:** Schools in this zone are three to four years away from reaching community-wide targets and should place emphasis on improving this area.
- **Growth:** Schools in this zone fell just below acceptable, yet they are close enough to the approval zone that might reasonably reach it within five years.
- **Approval:** This zone—established by teachers, parents, principals, and district administrators—is the target that all schools should be striving to hit. Scoring in this range does not mean a school is perfect, but it does mean that it is meeting or exceeding community-wide standards for a particular category.
- **Ideal:** This area represents a set of outcomes so close to perfect that they are unlikely to be realized by any school.
- **Dotted Rectangle:** This indicates the estimated range of a school's performance in a given category.

Source: Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA)

- Notes:**
- Zones are set according to feedback from community-wide stakeholders. Because stakeholders place different emphases on different categories, zones are unique to each category.
  - Categories include data from student surveys, teacher surveys, and district administrative data.

The Catalyst for Improvement

Schools that make rapid academic gains often experience a catalyzing moment, such as a change in leadership or school reconfiguration. For the Harvard-Kent, that moment came in the form of a 2015 Boston School Committee vote to extend the school day by 40 minutes. The Harvard-Kent opted to become one of the first Boston schools to take advantage of extended learning time (ELT). The Harvard-Kent team had wide latitude to determine how to use this time. Rather than making a unilateral decision, administrators consulted teachers.

A team of seven teachers joined school leaders to develop a plan for extended learning time. Staff focused their efforts on a common goal: to make the Harvard-Kent a school that children were excited to attend. The group spent time reviewing data to better understand the school’s strengths and weaknesses. They used this information to determine how to allocate additional time. Based on assessment data showing that math instruction was stronger than English

Language Arts (ELA) instruction, the team immediately recognized a need to allocate some additional time to ELA. They viewed this as a way to instill a sense of academic confidence in every child that would transfer across subject areas.

But educators also knew that focusing on academic content alone would not produce the positive learning environment they desired. They decided to couple a focus on ELA with a renewed commitment to enrichment. With this emphasis on enrichment, educators wanted to create opportunities for children to identify and develop their passions.

The following section explores two key practices that facilitated the transformation of the Harvard-Kent School. It describes how the initial catalyst of ELT, which provided a structure for educators to focus on ELA intervention and enrichment, sparked a phase of rapid growth. It further describes how this growth created momentum that led educators to take risks and experiment with their instruction.





# A Focus on Literacy

When educators reviewed data in 2015, they saw that only a quarter of Harvard-Kent third graders were proficient in reading (DESE, 2015). The impact of this struggle was evident across subject areas. Students became discouraged when they could not access a text in social studies class or interpret a word problem in math. Educators and administrators recognized a need to rethink their approach to literacy beginning with the youngest learners.

Five years later, on a March morning, four kindergarteners surrounded a teacher in the corner of a brightly colored classroom. Despite noise wafting in from the playground outside, five-year-old Jabril\* did not turn his head from his book. Though he didn’t recognize the word in front of him (“truck”), he was undaunted by the task of reading the page aloud to his peers. “T,” “ru,” “ck”—he uttered the sounds slowly, figuring out the word in the process. “Truck!” he

exclaimed, before completing the sentence, “The truck is stuck!” His peers smiled with approval, while his teacher thanked him for reading with so much expression.

For Jabril’s teacher, the process of watching non-readers transform into readers reignites her passion for teaching each year. Four days per week, she joins with her colleagues to divide students into small groups for literacy instruction. With texts and tasks aligned to their individual needs, children learn to attach letters and sounds. As the year progresses, educators watch as children decode progressively more difficult words. Teachers across grade levels agree that a commitment to phonics instruction in the early grades has contributed to a tremendous improvement in reading proficiency. Educators see the impact of this improvement in students who are excited to read and have the confidence to engage in rigorous learning across subject areas.



Teachers across grade levels agree:

A commitment to phonics instruction in the early grades has contributed to a tremendous improvement in reading proficiency.

\*Student names have been changed to protect confidentiality

## Literacy Intervention

A small-group literacy approach continues in later grades. Beginning in grade 2, Harvard-Kent students participate in 120 minutes of literacy intervention each week. Special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers push into each classroom for literacy intervention blocks, allowing educators to divide students into small groups for tailored instruction. For above-level students, this is a time for accelerated learning. Students strengthen their reading comprehension skills with access to increasingly complex texts. For struggling learners, the time is used to bolster critical foundational skills. All children are included in literacy intervention blocks. Students in Sheltered English Immersion and substantially separate special education programs join the regular education classroom during this time. Educators meet individually with students to share literacy data and set improvement goals.

## Grade-Appropriate Rigor

Because of the dedicated time for intervention, educators can focus strictly on grade-appropriate instruction during core ELA blocks. Each day, in every grade, Harvard-Kent students access grade-level texts. These texts are coupled with appropriately rigorous tasks, which include scaffolds for struggling learners and extension activities for those in need of additional challenge. Research shows that this approach has a tremendous impact, particularly for low-income students and students of color who have traditionally had the least access to grade-appropriate rigor (TNTP, 2015).

## The Impact

The Harvard-Kent’s multi-faceted ELA strategy quickly proved effective. By strengthening early literacy practices, offering individualized interventions, and ensuring every student has access to grade-appropriate rigor, educators saw rapid gains on interim assessments. With intervention taking place outside the standard ELA block, educators had the time and freedom to incorporate student-driven instruction. In many classrooms, teachers started asking students what they wanted to learn about. They adjusted lessons and units with student passions in mind. In other classrooms, teachers created opportunities for students to work collaboratively on interest-driven reading, research, and writing projects. Educators saw notable improvements each year, with third grade ELA proficiency rates nearly tripling between 2015 and 2019.





# Building Relationships with Interest-Based Learning

Every Thursday, the Harvard-Kent third grade class spends two hours of the school day at the Charlestown Boys & Girls Club. During their weekly visits, children express themselves through music and performing arts, develop teamwork skills through basketball, and learn to manage stress through yoga. Back at school, students in every grade level participate in teacher-led enrichment blocks. Children select programs that align with their interests, ranging from coding to theater. Teachers have full ownership over what they decide to teach. Many use the time to share a personal passion, such as origami or robotics. By leveraging both partner capacity and teachers’ unique skills, the Harvard-Kent offers enrichment options that appeal to a wide range of student interests.

When Harvard-Kent educators decided to devote a significant portion of extended learning time to enrichment, they hoped this investment would produce benefits for school culture, relationships, and classroom engagement. Five years later, many students say that enrichment blocks are their favorite part of the week. In addition to providing students with the opportunity to learn critical new skills, enrichment is a time when children build authentic connections with peers. Educators often set aside time at the end of class for children to recognize their peers’ strengths and contributions to the class community. For children who are shy or struggle socially, friendships blossom in environments where students gather based upon a shared interest.

Enrichment activities have strengthened teacher-student relationships as well. Without pressure to rapidly progress onto another lesson or unit, educators have time to get to know each child’s strengths, interests, fears, and dreams. Enrichment teachers often become trusted adults that children can go to when they are struggling. Educators recognize that these relationships have a direct impact on academic performance—and view strong relationships as a primary way that the school has narrowed opportunity gaps over the past 5 years. Data shows that students with disabilities, English learners, and Black students have made particularly large gains in recent years.

Research confirms the teachers’ perspective, as strong teacher-student relationships have been linked to higher attendance rates, better school engagement, lower rates of school discipline, and higher academic achievement (McCormick & O’Connor, 2014). Studies suggest that the benefits are most profound for low-income students and students of color (Maldonado-Carreño and Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Building upon an existing positive school climate, enrichment provided a wealth of opportunities for staff to strengthen their relationships with students and for students to strengthen relationships with their peers. Educators see these relationships as the foundation to all learning. “We’ve always done a lot of work around making connections with students,” Assistant Principal Mark Silva said. “You can teach all you want, but students need to know you care about them and want them to succeed.”



### Enrichment Options at the Harvard-Kent

A list of enrichment options and the different groups that lead them:

- Music & Arts (Boys & Girls Club)
- Coding & Robotics (Boston Public Schools’ Excellence for All program)
- Careers in the Community (Harvard-Kent Teachers)
- LEGO™ construction (Harvard-Kent Parents)
- Leadership skill-building (Harvard-Kent Teachers)



### Impact on Remote Learning

When schools closed due to COVID-19 in March 2020, relationships were critical to high rates of student engagement in remote learning. As of June 11, 98% of Harvard-Kent students had engaged in online learning at some point, with 80% engaged on a consistent basis. These percentages were much higher than the district average.

Educators also achieved high rates of engagement by ensuring ongoing communication with families. To the maximum extent possible, bilingual staff placed all calls in families’ home languages.

# The Way Forward

With their initial goals related to literacy and enrichment well underway, Harvard-Kent educators are already striving for more. They seek to ensure that every day, in every classroom, students have the support and opportunities they need to transform their challenges and build upon their strengths. By using the city as a classroom and building upon partnerships with community-based organizations, educators plan to increase opportunities for students to progress towards their personal and academic goals.

Harvard-Kent educators are embarking on the next phase of their journey with confidence in their ability to improve the school’s instructional program. “We’ve seen the way the community has been with us,” one teacher noted. “Parents and partners have supported us in everything that we do.” Educators who were initially concerned about devoting instructional time to experiential learning have seen the impact that these opportunities have on students. Asked what inspires her to innovate with her instruction, a Harvard-Kent teacher responded without hesitation, “Our kids come to us with big dreams and enormous potential. Our job is to clear anything that stands in their path.” Alongside their family and community partners, educators have started moving the Harvard-Kent towards its next phase of transformation. 🌟





Research

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center’s mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts’ preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit **renniecenter.org**.

Study Methods

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy partnered with EdVestors to examine the school-level factors that contributed to improvement at the Harvard Kent between 2014 and 2019. Information presented in this brief represents findings from a comprehensive data and document review; focus groups with students, teachers, and administrators; and a set of classroom observations meant to uncover key practices, both academic and non-academic, at the school.

Production

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About EdVestors

EdVestors' mission is to increase the number of public schools in Boston delivering dramatically improved educational outcomes for all students. Our goal is to ensure that every Boston student has access to an equitable, meaningful education that prepares them to activate their power and shape their future.

We combine strategic philanthropy, education expertise, and implementation support to help schools improve. EdVestors works in three ways: We seed promising ideas. The School Solutions Seed Fund makes direct grants to schools so they can pilot and test innovative solutions. We shine a spotlight on improving schools through the annual \$100,000 School on the Move Prize, which rewards schools that have made major strides to improve student outcomes. We scale efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps through our three current strategic initiatives in arts education, middle grades math, and career pathways.

About the School on the Move Prize

EdVestors launched the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize in 2006 to highlight the public school successes that often go unnoticed amid the many real challenges facing urban schools. Each year, a number of Boston public schools document rapid student progress that outpaces the rest of the district, and by recognizing and sharing how schools improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students. In 2019, the Harvard-Kent school was named the Prize winner and recipient of the \$100,000 award. In partnership with the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, EdVestors is pleased to release this case study, which sheds light on the Harvard-Kent School’s improvement story.



*Students who feel known and valued are more prepared to meaningfully engage in learning. Students who experience a sense of belonging have better self-esteem, higher rates of classroom participation, and higher academic achievement.*

*(Korpershoek, 2018)*



# SCHOOL ON THE MOVE Prize

## Acknowledgments

The Rennie Center would like to express its gratitude to the students, teachers, and administration at the Harvard-Kent School for their participation in this study. We are especially grateful to Principal Jason Gallagher and Assistant Principal Mark Silva who worked in partnership with us to complete this research study. We were inspired by your passion, creativity, and commitment to supporting every Harvard-Kent child and family during an unprecedented school year. We would also like to express our gratitude to the team at EdVestors—particularly Emily Barr—for your ongoing partnership throughout this project.

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